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ABSTRACT

While there is much disagreement about how to go about reforming schools, one point of agreement is that leadership is critical to this process. Unfortunately, the discussion of leadership has not been sufficiently informed by the voices of those who have been directly involved in reforming old schools and creating new ones. This paper describes the experiences and understandings of teacher-leaders who served as directors of six public alternative elementary schools in New York City. The schools ranged from 7 to 19 years old and identified themselves as learner-centered. Data were derived from individual and group interviews with the school directors, observations, and document analysis. The schools were organized as autonomous units within larger school buildings and led by teacher-leaders instead of principals. Small and diverse, they were organized into heterogeneous, multiage classes. They featured active involvement of students, an interdisciplinary approach, and teachers as facilitators. Teacher-leaders balanced a variety of skills and abilities--administrative, political, and pedagogical understandings. They performed a wide range of functions, such as supporting teachers' growth, providing staff with continual learning opportunities, upholding the vision and values of the schools, empowering others, working within contexts of contradictory values, and working with limited resources and supports. A history of learner-centered schools and discussion of the Center for Collaborative Education Schools' core values are included. (LMI)

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A Culture in the Making:

Leadership in Learner-Centered Schools

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April 1994

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Introduction

The need for leadership in the struggle to build and transform schools into places where students can learn in challenging, meaningful, and purposeful contexts is the subject of much discussion and many reports. While there is a great deal of disagreement as to how to go about reforming schools, one point on which there is agreement is that leadership is critical to this process (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Patterson, 1993; Poplin, 1992, pp. 10-11; Sergiovanni, 1992). Unfortunately, the discussion of leadership has not been sufficiently informed by the voices and experiences of those who have been directly involved in reforming old schools and creating new ones. Yet it is precisely by observing and listening to these voices that we can gain a clearer understanding of how schools change, how new ways of working are established, and how these norms are "built into the walls" of schools through the subtle interchanges of everyday living and working.

This chapter attempts to address this need by giving voice to the experiences and understandings of teacher-leaders who are (or have been) the directors of six public alternative elementary schools in New York City. These schools are all from seven to 19 years old and identify themselves as "learner-centered."[1] By "learner-centered" we mean focusing on meeting the needs of learners in school organization, governance, curriculum, and teaching. This definition is enacted through a number of commonly shared characteristics: The schools are autonomous units, situated within larger school buildings and led by teacher-directors, not building principals. Their populations are small (anywhere from 200 to 300 students) and diverse (they reflect the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity of New York City). They are organized into heterogeneous, multi-age classes and are structured to encourage and enhance collaboration among faculty, students, and students' families. Their classroom environments feature active involvement with materials and experiences, peer interaction, and an interdisciplinary approach to learning. Teachers function as facilitators and supporters of student learning rather than as transmitters of information.

The authors of this chapter felt uniquely situated to develop and to conduct this study. We are all former teachers who have, among us, experienced a variety of leadership roles. Our first author is a university professor who has been both a researcher and an educator of

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[1]The elementary schools represented in this study are Central Park East 1 (CPE 1), Central Park East 2, (CPE 2), River East, P.S. 234, the Brooklyn New School, and the New Program at P.S. 261. They are all members of the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), the New York City affiliate of the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national reform network of elementary and secondary schools that was created in 1985.

educators in a number of collaborative school/university partnerships. She currently is co-director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching. Our second author is a former teacher-director who created and developed a learner-centered school similar to those discussed in this chapter and who, in her present role as a researcher and teacher educator, is involved in a variety of educational restructuring initiatives. And our third author is one of the teacher-leaders who was interviewed for this study. She is presently the founding director of a newly formed learner-centered New York City school.

As a result of these different experiences, all three of us have come to see firsthand the critical role that leadership can play in efforts to change schools and schooling. Unfortunately, however, it seems that the role of leadership is not well understood, although it is critically important. By studying the role of leadership, particularly as it plays out in learner-centered schools, we can enrich and deepen our understanding of the unique characteristics and practices of the teacher-directors who are part of the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) schools.[2] We developed the following set of questions: How are values of "learner-centeredness" played out in schools? How do leaders work within their schools to build community? How are norms and structures that keep a school focused on students' lives and their learning built and sustained? What does it take to build commitment and motivate teachers to become an inquiring community? How do leaders think about and act on their own individual interests and concerns while dealing with the collective work of running a school? How do they cope with the distractions of daily problems as they struggle to improve the quality of life and learning in the school?

To find answers to these questions we sought individual and group interviews with the school directors, made a series of observations in their schools, and studied the documents produced by the schools. These research efforts provided us with an opportunity to learn not only about issues of leadership, but also about how schools are created to focus on learners, and how norms, values, and practices are maintained through a succession of leadership and variations in style.

We begin our study with a brief history of these schools, recognizing that they have been built on a foundation of ideas strongly rooted in the past.

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[2]The original leaders of these schools, as well as their successors, are represented in this study. The original leaders all continue, however, to engage in other leadership work. In two schools, retired directors are now involved in leadership roles in a preparatory program for urban school principals; two others are leaders in secondary schools; and one school has developed a form of shared leadership due to the particularities of the context.

History and Context

These learner-centered schools are philosophically rooted in the work of child-centered educators and theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who believed that schools should be observant of children's interests and responsive to their needs, that the purpose of education was to create the conditions for student development and autonomy while establishing a pattern of support for continuous progress within a school community nurtured by a democratic ethic (Dewey, 1916, 1938, 1956; Froebel, 1974). These ideas have been enriched and expanded over the years through the work of educators, researchers, and philosophers such as Caroline Pratt (1948), Jean Piaget (1969), Jerome Bruner (1966), Patricia Carini (1975, 1979), Maxine Greene (1978, 1984), L.S. Vygotsky (1978), Eleanor Duckworth (1987), and Sue Bredekamp (1987). They were first developed and brought to life in the public schools of the United States by Lillian Weber, the founder of the City College Open Corridor/Workshop Center Advisory, in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. The initiative she led was committed to enacting teaching practices and organizational structures that reflected understandings of child development. It grouped several primary-grade classrooms together along the corridors of selected public schools. The corridors not only defined the organizational structure of the programs; they were also literally used as learning centers. This arrangement encouraged activities emanating from inside the classrooms to flow out into the corridors. The teaching and learning that took place in these corridors helped to develop an increased awareness of the different kinds of contexts and resources that can nurture children's growth.

The practices developed in these corridors were also instrumental in stimulating thinking about how to apply understandings of teaching and learning not only to children, but to the adults charged with supporting their development. Corridor advisors assisted in this process. They were experienced teachers themselves who were knowledgeable about child development and sensitized to issues of adult learning, and who possessed a range of teaching strategies supportive of both teacher and student learning. They worked one day a week in each corridor program, always independent of the supervisory structure, providing teachers with continual opportunities to discuss and get feedback on their practice. They helped to support teachers to connect to their own interests, to engage in their own inquiry, and thus to experience themselves as learners. Weber explains:

> [The Workshop Center Advisory] was intended to be facilitating of teachers, to support them in a new teacher role, and to provide beginnings for people to break with the traditional isolation of teacher/teacher, teacher/child, and child/child.[3]

This pioneering work was in large part responsible for the emergence of a new view of the teacher's role and a new conceptualization of the nature of professional development.

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[3]Quotations that are not referenced are all from individuals interviewed from the CCE schools discussed herein.

The teacher's role was being crafted as that of facilitator of student learning rather than simply a transmitter of information. Conceptions of professional development were changing from a deficit to a capacity-building model -- making a shift from "training" teachers in the use of teaching packages and recipes tc developing and supporting teachers' varied strengths through a process of collegial dialogue and reflection. Weber comments:

> The idea was to assist the teacher. The point was not to make someone over, but to be supportive of teachers' strengths in the direction of supporting children. [In the course of this initiative] the advisors continually tested out how things worked or didn't work. Questions evolved. "How do you get a *pattern* of support for children's motion forward given that each child is an individual?" Many questions were raised in the course of addressing this question. These inevitably led to battles on the institutional front.

The "institutional front" to which Weber refers was the national, test-driven, "back-to-basics" movement of the 1970s (Cuban, 1984), which developed during the same period in which the Open Corridor initiative was launched. At this time an emphasis on mastery of basic skills as a prerequisite for higher-order thinking was competing with an emphasis on developing habits of ongoing student inquiry. This was reflected in a proliferation of teacher-proof, sequential, discipline-based curricula that were discouraging efforts to get teachers to create their own multidimensional, interdisciplinary studies.

Despite the setbacks to child-centered education caused by this clash with the back-to-basics movement, many of the practices that were being forged by Weber and her colleagues have since become commonly acknowledged standards of excellence in contemporary professional practice. Classrooms featuring informal arrangements, active involvement with materials and experiences, an inquiry-based orientation, interage and heterogeneous grouping, and authentic assessment of student work are being promoted and increasingly accepted today as an integral part of the movement for educational reform (Darling-Hammond, 1993; Oakes, 1985; Resnick, 1987).

Central Park East: Leadership from within the Community

A powerful offspring of the Open Corridor/Workshop Center Advisory was the Central Park East Elementary School (CPE) created by Deborah Meier, an original participant in Weber's initiative.[4] A small elementary public school of choice, located in New York City's

[4]It is important to note that Weber's idea of a teacher advisory, as well as the values inherent in it, were critical to Central Park East's and later the Center for Collaborative Education's notion of a teacher-director. The efforts of this school and this organization to establish a learning community in which both students and teachers are jointly involved in inquiring how to support student and teacher learning all developed from Open Corridor practices.

East Harlem neighborhood, CPE was designed to be a whole-school community that put understandings about child development into practice throughout the grades while thinking about and treating teachers in the same way that they were being asked to think about and treat their students. The school's intent was to create a racially and socioeconomically diverse community that would identify each individual's strengths and interests, support each student as a capable learner, and do this in an equitable manner. The original idea about school structure and governance was that there would be no formal leadership position so that all decisions could be made collectively and everyone could build the school together. All teachers were to work directly with the children, thus making it possible to have smaller classes. Three teachers, two aides, and a paraprofessional made up the original adult community while the student community began with 35 children and eventually grew to 260.

Although the formation of CPE has been written about elsewhere (Bensman, 1987), the formation of leadership *values* and *ways of working* has been assumed and perhaps taken for granted. However, the challenge to leadership inherent in the process of creating CPE is revealed in its struggles to develop as a school community that focuses on student needs and interests; that rethinks student evaluation (an early precursor to performance assessments); that attempts to fully involve parents, families, students, and teachers in the life of the school; and that concomitantly develops a language and a culture shifting from a blame and deficit norm to one of development and collective responsibility for the school community.

Staff meetings, initially emphasizing egalitarian values, became the centerpiece for making decisions about the fledgling school. But by the end of the second year, budget cuts, district demands, and the unwieldy process of trying to make *all* decisions collaboratively resulted in the staff's realization that creating a separate position of "teacher-director" was indeed going to be necessary. Someone had to assume responsibility for protecting and nurturing the life of the school -- representing the school to the district, pressing to keep the focus of the school on students' needs, and developing growing relationships with parents and families. This part of the CPE story reveals a view of leadership that grew out of the process of creating and defining a "democratic learning community." The teacher-director is "of" the community, an advisor rather than a supervisor, a keeper and developer of values of student-centered practice rather than a maintainer of the system, a creator of opportunities to learn rather than an enforcer of the status quo.

These values were deepened and extended over the years, not only at Central Park East Elementary School (which came to be known as CPE 1), but at the other small New York City public schools that were inspired by the CPE model. While the conditions of each of these schools are unique, the schools share a set of core values and common assumptions about teaching, learning, and human development. While this core encourages expression of individual differences and the building of cultures uniquely their own, it also binds them together in a larger community that offers them a historical perspective on the continuity of their struggle, support to know and do more, and a moral and material base for the difficult task of engaging in change.

Core Values of the Center for Collaborative Education Schools

When visiting any of the Center for Collaborative Education schools, one is struck by how clearly their core values are evidenced in their policies and practices. We identify several of them here.

All Children Have the Capacity to Learn

Although there is much talk in school reform circles these days about all children having the capacity to learn, this axiom is not just rhetoric in the Center for Collaborative Education schools. It is indeed the philosophical foundation -- the core of the core -- on which the schools are built and organized. This belief is evident in school policies and structures, which provide equal learning opportunities and resources for all students, regardless of their differing experiences and abilities. Classrooms are heterogeneously grouped to include students who represent a span of ages, a range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, and a spectrum of individual strengths and talents (including special education students). Each student is supported to develop at his or her own pace and an attempt is made to provide everyone with the necessary resources for the realization of each individual's potential to the fullest extent possible.

Differences in abilities are provided for in a number of respectful ways. Students who require special learning supports (in Chapter 1 or Resource Room programs) are not isolated from the classroom or stigmatized by their need. In some schools, students with special needs are provided with a program of enrichment in their classrooms that allows participation by other interested students. For example, a Resource Room teacher in one particular school often connects her instruction to enjoyable cooking activities and, as a consequence, is frequently inundated with requests by regular education students to join in her projects.

Many of the schools support students' individual interests by providing opportunities for them to select from a range of different types of classes (extra dance, art, music, and sport classes are notable examples of these). In contrast to many schools -- where both teachers and curricula are rationed to those whose academic success is most assured (Oakes, 1985) -- *all* of the students in these schools are given access to high- quality teaching and to a "thinking curriculum" that provides all students with work that challenges them to develop the ability to use their minds well -- to think critically and creatively, to engage in deep exploration of ideas and topics, and to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for future school and life experiences. This is made possible because the schools provide professional growth opportunities for all teachers.

At the same time that student differences are addressed in these schools, a conscious effort is being made to develop a common standard of excellence for what and how students learn. This is being accomplished in a variety of ways. One is the development of

open-ended assignments that provide entry points for many different kinds of learners and that allow students to participate at a variety of difficulty levels. For example, when studying the New York City harbor, all second/third-grade students in one of the schools engaged in a core set of interdisciplinary experiences. In addition, however, some students -- driven by their interests or their abilities -- pursued other areas of study connected with the topic. Some engaged in historical research, some wrote stories that centered on the area of study, some built models of bridges or dioramas of the harbor utilizing a range of materials. No two students produced the same work or came away from the study with exactly the same information, but all were exposed to some basic ideas and information and some general principles of learning and inquiry.

Another way that a standard of excellence is being developed is through public demonstrations of student learning that expose students to a variety of levels of academic success and a variety of forms in which knowledge can be expressed. In many of the schools, units of study are often concluded by exhibitions or "museums" in which students display and explain their work to their classmates, schoolmates, family members, and school faculty. These demonstrations have included not only written reports but experiments, constructions, puppet shows, videos, musical performances, and art exhibits.

Still another way in which standards for learning and for student outcomes are developed is by providing students with regular opportunities for discussion of their different learning strategies. Such discussions take place at classroom meetings, small group forums, or individual conferences between teachers and students. One director describes how such discussions facilitate learning for the children in her school:

> When a math problem is discussed at a classroom meeting, many strategies for learning will often be presented. Sometimes one person's strategy will open up an understanding for another. For example, at one meeting Hugh explained how he does multiplication by engaging in repeated addition. This was the only way that Manuel, who had been having a terrible time grasping the concept, seemed to be able to understand it. Although many of us had tried to help Manuel before, it wasn't until he heard and saw a fellow student's explanation that he was finally able to make the connection.

Honoring Diversity

The schools represented in this study all demonstrate a variety of ways in which they consciously acknowledge and demonstrate a respect for diversity -- of cultures, language, gender, and socioeconomic background, as well as of various thinking styles, learning rates, and academic, social, and physical abilities. One of the directors of the schools notes the importance of this particular value: "Diversity is not an add-on, but a way of thinking here."

Support for diverse learning styles and strengths is evident everywhere in these schools. Students are often seen working side by side, utilizing their particular interests and

strengths to enrich and extend the work of others as well as to create individual paths of entry into their own particular challenges. Two students involved in an animal research project in a fourth/fifth-grade classroom in one of the schools provide a good example of this. Both were deeply engaged in study about cats and were exploring a variety of informational texts. We were informed by the teacher that one of the students was particularly able in reading and writing but inexperienced in and intimidated by visual art forms. The other struggled mightily with the printed form but was extraordinarily uninhibited and able to express his ideas through painting and drawing. As these two worked together, we saw each contributing to the research process in his area of strength -- one provided the written text, the other provided the illustrations. Yet both were involved in analysis and discussion of the content, and both were utilizing research and problem-solving skills. The director of the school explained how they work to develop adaptive teaching: "It's about acknowledging that each [person] has different gifts, strengths, and concerns and then finding a way to utilize them."

In addition to respect for different learning styles, these schools also value cultural diversity. One can see it sprinkled throughout the learning environment -- in the books the children read, the stories they write, the songs they sing, the foods they cook, the trips they take, and the conversations they have. One can see it in the composition of school staffs, which reflect the diversity of their student populations. (Where this is not the case we were told that recruitment of teachers from diverse cultures and backgrounds is a number-one priority.) In addition, one can see it in the opportunities provided for families to be meaningfully involved in the life of the schools -- family histories and cultural traditions are used as the starting point of many classroom studies; ethnic meals and artistic performances are a regular feature of the cultural lives of the schools; and home/school conferences and other forms of communication regularly solicit family languages, traditions, and knowledge about the learner to inform the teaching that takes place in the school. The views and voices of all the directors are clear and uncompromising in this regard. One director said: "Everybody is special -- the greater the variety, the richer a life for ourselves and the kids. School has to be all inclusive. It has to be a place where all are safe and respected -- adults, parents, everyone."

Providing for the Needs of the "Whole Child"

Another value held in common by the Center for Collaborative Education schools is their respect for the needs -- emotional, physical, artistic, and academic -- of the "whole child." Children's needs are placed before bureaucratic considerations and guide both educational practice and policy. This is manifested in the details that comprise the quality of daily life for the children in these schools. The tone of voice and the gestures used by adults as they speak to children, the manner in which such daily routines as lining up for buses are conducted, the atmosphere at breakfast/lunch/recess, the way security guards and custodians interact with students, as well as how children who are sick or lonely are treated, all demonstrate the dignity and respect that is regularly accorded to children.

Care and concern are also exhibited for other aspects of children's lives traditionally

considered outside the realm of the school's responsibilities. Physical health, mental health, and extracurricular needs are considered important and are addressed by the schools in a variety of ways: Some offer after-school programs and make arrangements for children to attend summer camps; some refer families to service providers for health-related issues; some provide childcare during evening meetings.

Another means of addressing children's needs, used by virtually all of the CCE schools, is the Descriptive Review (Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research, 1980). This is a process in which school personnel collaboratively discuss issues, problems, or concerns of a child in a full and holistic way. The process is usually undertaken after school hours and begins with a description of a child, developed from documented observations over time collected by the child's classroom teacher. This description is followed by comments from those who participate in the review process. They offer suggestions for ways the teacher and school can best support the growth of the child.

> The perspectives through which the child is described are multiple, to insure a balanced portrayal of the person, that neither overemphasizes some current "problem" nor minimizes an ongoing difficulty. The description of the child addresses the following facets of the person as these characteristics are expressed within the classroom setting at the present time: .
>
> - the child's physical presence and gesture
> - the child's disposition
> - the child's relationships with other children and adults
> - the child's activities and interests
> - the child's approach to formal learning
> - the child's strengths and vulnerabilities (pp. 26-27)

The kind of observation and discussion that takes place during the Descriptive Review offers understandings that set the tone for a learning environment that provides for the needs of the whole child and makes each child visible to the school community. This is especially powerful in schools that serve diverse communities and that are struggling to include all children in the ranks of successful learners. A director explains: "The value of an education will never be missed by visible and included children. They will be too excited by their own wonderful ideas to give up on learning."

Assessments in Support of Meaningful Teaching and Learning

The Descriptive Review process is related to still another core value of CCE schools: Assessments of student work are intricately connected to and supportive of meaningful teaching and learning. One of the original directors describes how this aspect of all of the schools has been woven into their structure from their inception:

> From the beginning, we realized we couldn't assess in this kind of setting in any

traditional way. We had to have different assessment tools which could be used to report to teachers, families, and posterity. We had to develop ways to see the work and to watch kids grow over time.

Many kinds of assessments have thus been developed to provide information to teachers, families, and communities about the progress of students and of the schools as a whole. Some schools keep track of student growth through documented teacher observations collected over time. Some keep samples of student work in portfolios. Some have students demonstrate what they can do in research projects, scientific experiments, performances, exhibitions, or interdisciplinary tasks that resemble the problems of real-life situations. Many have students engage in self-assessments and all schools report their learnings about students in detailed narrative progress reports sent home to families on a regular basis, followed by lengthy home/school conferences in which student work is discussed and reviewed.

At present these practices, which focus on direct evidence of students' work gathered by teachers and interwoven into the teaching/learning process, are undertaken as an addition to the indirect evidence collected by external agencies through the norm-referenced standardized tests currently mandated in New York City and New York State. Involvement in both the internal and external assessment systems creates great tensions and problems for the schools. Not only is there not enough time for teachers to fulfill the requirements of these two very different systems, but there are significant differences in what the systems assess and in how they go about assessing it. All the directors of the CCE schools, however, expressed their optimism about the current flurry of reform taking place at all levels of the educational system. They see this phenomenon as public validation of the learning-centered assessment that has long been in use in their schools.

Viewing Everyone as a Learner

Another value held in common by the Center for Collaborative Education schools is that all of the members of their school communities -- students, staff, and families alike -- are viewed as learners and provided with continual growth opportunities. Students are encouraged to exchange ideas among themselves and with their teachers through small-group discussions, classroom meetings, and meetings of the whole school community. These model the process of "learning how to learn" and create an atmosphere encouraging of inquiry and problem solving.

Teachers and other school support staff are also provided with various opportunities for ongoing learning. Staff meet together in formal as well as informal meetings, including semi-annual all-school retreats, where ideas and resources are exchanged to deepen understandings of children, of teaching, and of their own personal/professional growth.

In addition, the family members of students are included in the learning environment of these schools. Two-way learning is at the heart of this relationship -- teachers learning from families about their children and families learning from schools about education. This is

enacted through a variety of communication forms: teacher curriculum letters and homework notes, director newsletters, phone calls to family members, narrative progress reports, and school/home conferences.

These continual ways in which members of the school community can connect and reconnect to being learners are facilitated by the work of the school directors. One of them explains: "Someone has to pull in the world so that teachers [and others] don't get ingrown. Someone needs to create opportunities to talk about why we do what we do, to rethink, to validate, to deal with ideas."

As directors do this, an atmosphere is created in their schools that is respectful, trusting, and facilitating for the learning of both the children and the adults involved. The comments of one of the school directors reveals more about the how and why:

> We have based our theories about school on what we think to be true about human learning. Certain kinds of school environments speak to what's true about human learning and help it emerge so that in the process of teaching children, and talking about teaching children, and thinking about themselves as learners, teachers reconnect to who they are as learners.

A Democratic Learning Community

The embodiment of the values discussed above results in a school culture and organization that promotes democratic values and that makes room for everyone to have a voice. The conviction is strong in the CCE community that schools should be organized in ways that allow students and adults to live their beliefs, not just to talk about them. This conviction is expressed by the words of the directors:

> [We want] to help children learn how to cooperate and how to respect the differences among them.

> We share a common belief in teaching about nonviolence, sexism, and racism. These aspects of a living democracy have always been stressed in these schools.

These beliefs are put into practice in the schools' organizational structures as well as in the development of their curricula. Culturally sensitive curricula are consciously developed that include the study of people and places from nondominant cultures and that utilize the experiences and resources of the schools' diverse communit. Students engage in neighborhood studies, in community service projects, and in work that connects their daily lives to the issues and problems of the world at large. In addition, conflict-resolution programs help them to develop problem-solving strategies. Student newsletters and surveys provide access to the views and concerns of their peers. (In one of the upper-grade classes in the schools a survey was developed to elicit the views held by students and parents about homework, so that assignments could be developed by the teacher to most effectively

incorporate family concerns and ideas.)

School structures also speak to aspects of democratic living. These provide opportunities for families and teachers to participate in shaping the vision and work of the school. Many have been mentioned previously -- Descriptive Reviews, faculty meetings, all-school retreats, parent meetings, conferences, progress reports, newsletters, and curriculum letters. One of the directors, who helped develop her school from its inception, explains how the vision of a democratic community, in which all participants have a say in decisions affecting their lives, has been a driving force of her school: "From the beginning, there was always the sense that these intelligent people should have a say in how the school worked."

How Leaders Lead in Learner-Centered Schools: Balancing Challenges and Commitments

Fashioning the role of teacher-director has particular meaning in CCE schools. The directors are required to simultaneously balance a variety of skills and abilities: administrative skills (overseeing paperwork, buses, schedules), political skills (educating and negotiating with stakeholders in the educational enterprise, both inside and outside of their schools), pedagogical understandings (providing ongoing professional development and support to teachers), and a vision for the future (anticipating and preparing for new developments). This multifaceted combination of attributes is difficult to find in any one individual and the directors readily acknowledge their limitations in this regard. But recognizing one's strengths and building on the particulars of personal and professional challenges seems part of the norm of these school communities. Statements by directors ranging from "I model decency" and "I know what I can't do" to "I never wanted to be a principal; I thought I would always be struggling and compromising" suggest the candor and integrity of the struggle to be "leaders *of* the community and representatives *from* the community." The strong value placed on the assumption that "everybody, absolutely everybody, is capable of having ideas, and making sense of the world and needs to be taken seriously" seems to be as much a credo for the directors as it is for other members of their communities.

The challenge of constructing a learner-centered community is made greater in the case of these particular schools by the fact that the directors and schools are trying to do their work within the context of a routinized and standardized big-city school system. Directors are thus required to simultaneously develop a set of skills and responsibilities that can keep their organizations healthy and growing and another set of skills that can effectively maneuver the tensions and challenges posed by membership in the ranks of the public school bureaucracy.

Internal Challenges and Demands

In the course of their daily lives in schools, teacher-directors experience many situations that challenge their values, question their commitments, and test their educational understandings. The role of director calls on a host of leadership attributes and dispositions. It requires school leaders to simultaneously be educators, problem solvers, crisis managers, change-agents, enablers, consensus builders, and networkers -- as well as limit-setters and authority figures. As teacher-directors enact these sometimes contradictory roles, achieving a balanced performance tests even those with the strongest mettle: when to assert and when to hold back; when to intervene and how to do it right; when to deliberately lead and take a position and when to facilitate group struggle; how to handle conflict and how to make it productive; how to be accepting and respectful of differences while seeking to achieve overall agreement; how to be patient and supportive of strengths in the face of difficult problems; how to simultaneously advocate for teachers, children, and their families while maintaining the day-to-day functioning of a school.

Supporting the Growth of Teachers. Directors facilitate and support teacher growth in much the same way that teachers are expected to do with children. As one director explains:

> What we model for kids, I try to model for adults. Good kindergarten practice is also good leadership practice. It's about acknowledging that each has different gifts, strengths, and concerns and then finding a way to utilize them. It's about giving teachers a sense of understanding, empathy, partnership, belonging. My personal understanding of learner-centered teaching has become my model of leadership.

Expanding on this idea, another director adds:

> I try to get to know each person by him/herself, as an individual. Then I find something I can relate to and support. I struggle against making judgments (the skill of observing and describing children helps a lot here). I can't let judgment get in the way of the forward movement of the teacher. It's important to always leave the teacher with respect.

Similar to the way learner-centered teaching takes place, the director functions as an observer, supporter, and reflector of individual and institutional memory for others ("Remember when you did that?") and as a keeper of teachers' questions and comments. The director often reflects these questions and answers back to the teachers, picking up pieces of the myriad experiences taking place in and out of the classroom, and using them as a reminder and a connection to larger ideas in the outside world. One teacher explains how this has helped her growth:

> The sharing that goes on in the classroom between myself and the kids is the same process that goes on between the director and the teachers. She often reflects back to us what has happened in our classrooms, helping us see to the positive things that

have happened during the day rather than just the last crazy five minutes we are able to remember.

Building on strengths (a norm for students) is also the way directors support the learning and growth of adults. But there are delicate balances to maintain: how to nurture while also pushing forward by asking hard questions, raising new issues, and maintaining a standard of excellence for teaching; how to find a way to facilitate rather than dictate; how to assert leadership and assume responsibility while also building on the initiatives of others. These concerns are among the problems faced by all the directors:

> I have had many conflicts about the appropriate way to enact my role. I struggle with knowing when to exert authority and when to support the initiatives of others; how to be respectful of the views and feelings of others without losing the strength and integrity of a vision which supports student learning; how to balance differences in cultures and values and to incorporate aspects of these into the community to continually build common ground.

Perhaps most subtle, and yet most critical, is that directors must find ways to support teachers so that they can be supportive of the learning process and thereby support students and their families. Directors do this by taking care of paperwork; supervising buses, breakfast, lunch, and recess times; settling disputes among students; and attending to district demands. The assumption of these responsibilities (frequently considered unimportant and mundane) ultimately frees teachers to concentrate on their students. This dignifies the hard and intense work of teaching.

Providing Staff with Continual Learning Opportunities. Directors of these learner-centered schools have a deep conviction that growth and learning are never-ending. One says: "Learning about learning is never finished. There is no end to the need to continue to deepen understanding."

Directors continually search for ways to deepen and sustain the culture of learner-centered education. They encourage teachers to try out new ideas -- to teach a different grade level, to invest in new equipment, to attend classes or conferences, or to teach with other colleagues. They are aware that "staying fresh" in teaching is a major problem. Directors also struggle to bring new teachers into the fold -- to orient them to learner-centered thinking and to help them develop effective teaching strategies. One director deliberately places new teachers alongside more experienced teachers in the classroom corridors so that they can learn from exposure to one another.

All of the directors have created structures to address the fact that "teachers, like students, need many different kinds of learning experiences." Directors provide opportunities for teachers to work with and support each other in a variety of ways: to visit each others' classrooms, to take trips together to other schools, to be involved in child study teams and Descriptive Reviews, to discuss professional books and articles, to meet on issues of common

concern -- issues of curriculum, world events, or special happenings in the community. These activities create an atmosphere that is described by one director as a "culture of extreme support" for individual as well as collective learning. One director explains:

> Our school is literally an institution of higher education. There are lots of opportunities for dialogue and conversation -- both formal and informal. We have formal meetings -- weekly grade meetings, monthly staff meetings. But the informal meetings every day after school are the best.

Teachers and staff in these learner-centered schools are thus continually engaged in talk about work, values, processes, ideas, and concerns. These conversations -- facilitated by the directors -- are the cornerstone of professional development through which staff members develop a powerful sense of collegiality, collaboration, and community.

Upholding the Vision and Values of the School. As the years have gone by and the schools have evolved, a major challenge for teacher-directors has been the preservation of the core learner-centered values. Directors have struggled to find ways to maintain the original school communities' intimacy and zeal as they have grown in size and brought in new people. This has entailed developing ways to avoid insularity, self-satisfaction, and nonproductive conflict as well as creating mechanisms to connect to the outside world of ideas and people.

Another challenge that has arisen as schools have become more established is that the cohesiveness of the original communities has often become diluted. Several directors are currently experiencing this phenomenon in their schools. They report that as their schools have become increasingly successful, the parent bodies have become increasingly diverse. Families have joined the schools for a variety of reasons:, some in search of a learner-centered philosophy, others in search of a school that is safe and well-equipped and has a caring staff or a "good" reputation.

Such a diversity of reasons for attending the schools brings diverse views about future directions and priorities. Sometimes teachers or families find that they have conflicts with the fundamental values of the schools. This presents an important challenge to school leadership -- a challenge to educate and to build a base of support for learner-centered practices while being respectful of input and participation. Directors address this challenge by listening, evaluating, and responding to concerns in a way that incorporates professional knowledge about teaching and change. One director described a situation that highlights the need for these important skills and understandings:

> A parent objected to heterogeneous grouping out of a belief that it didn't best serve her child. She wanted the school to reconsider this practice for the community as a whole. I had to find a way to help her understand that some values are inviolable and form the basis of our school.

Realizing the Vision through Empowerment of Others. Underlying this seemingly endless

array of ways that directors subtly or frontally lead is a vision that is educational, social, and fundamentally political in nature. Keeping this vision comprehensive is difficult. It necessitates being aware that although one has the power to "push things through," it is not worth it. Instead, connecting to what people understand, want, believe, and are ready to do is the great challenge. As one director states: "It's not enough to have good ideas. Helping others to realize their good ideas and come together to create a common vision and then to jointly enact that vision is the real leadership challenge."

How to be a hub and be central to all aspects of the school while not being in the center, how to be the spokesperson for all the constituencies without demanding compliance to a singular view, how to turn problems into possibilities, are aspects of leadership style that become embodied in community belief and action, according to another director: "I try to empower people, have a calming effect, model decency, and help people listen to one another. I want to help people find solutions to problems, to see that problems are solvable." Creating these conditions calls on directors to handle dualities and to be closely connected to people, events, and the dailiness of school -- but also, a director suggests, to have some distance: "I feel passionately for others but I also have common sense. I am a stabilizing factor in my school."

To keep a school community constantly open to struggle with and develop its ideals means that directors also need to be open to change: "I value each person but also want to challenge each person. I want us to be open to change -- to expose ourselves and our classrooms to that. I want people to speak up, raise issues."

All of these examples give a sense of how, in attempting to put these ideas into practice, directors provide teachers with similar supports to the supports teachers provide to their students: "I needed to let them do what they needed to do. And I needed to figure out what they needed. But I found that the more respect and trust I gave to the staff, the more they gave the same to the kids."

When teachers and students feel efficacious in their work, this becomes the real meaning of "empowerment." This is not a slogan; it is the subtle means by which directors create the conditions for continuous growth for adults and students alike. When this happens, the momentum of change cannot be contained. It makes one director feel like shouting, "Hey, wait for me, *I'm* your leader!" (Barth, 1990, p. 170).

External Challenges

While the internal growth of a school community presents challenges that pull directors in different directions, problems of the outside world also present particular challenges. Even though the reform community is articulate about the need for change -- and these schools are indeed a testimony to its potential -- the contexts in which these schools are embedded require special skills and abilities (political, practical, and pedagogical) of their leaders even as they are guided by their strong commitments and shared purposes (Darling-

Hammond, 1993; McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993).

Working within Contexts of Contradictory Values. These directors are charting the course of their schools in the context of district and system policies and politics that are often in conflict with their values. This creates great frustration for the directors, most particularly in the areas of curriculum and assessment. Curriculum mandates and standardized testing clash directly with the developmental and holistic practices that are fundamental to learner-centered schools. While teaching and assessment in learner-centered schools are geared to the differing strengths and needs of students, the success of the schools and their practices is nevertheless measured through the use of standardized tests, known to do a notoriously poor job of reflecting students' strengths and differences (Darling-Hammond, 1991). This phenomenon places directors and their staff in an inextricable bind. They must simultaneously fulfill the requirements for survival in the established system and struggle to develop and maintain an "alternate" community that enacts, takes risks, and works to establish practices that question categorization of students, fragmentation of the school program, and a standardized conception of knowledge and learning.

Working with Limited Resources and Supports. Additional challenges faced by directors revolve around the necessity for reconfiguring how money is spent, what human and material resources are available, and how time is allocated in their schools. Schools are not currently given the resources to provide enough time for teachers to engage in the kind of observing, recording, reflecting, and reporting that is required for learner-centered teaching. They also do not receive the resources to provide teachers with adequate opportunities for professional growth. While directors are frustrated by these limitations, they have found a number of ways to compensate for them: seeking financial supports from outside the school system, learning how to use networks external to the school, depending on a high level of commitment from their staffs.

A Network of Community Values: Support for Leading and Learning

The learner-centered schools described in this chapter are embedded in a network -- the Center for Collaborative Education -- that supports and gives meaning to their daily work. What happens in each individual school takes on a greater significance because it is part of a larger whole.

Although there has been little empirical study of educational networks and their effects on members, it has been suggested that there is a cohesive power in networks that represents "the strength of weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973). Instead of relying only on people who are friends (strong ties), networks provide a power and influence over people in organizations by connecting them to norms, values, and influences that occur indirectly (weak ties). Two examples illustrate the efficaciousness of networks.

One director spoke of how her attendance at a network meeting encouraged her to initiate implementation of authentic assessment in her school. Through discussion of the various possibilities for how the work of students could be assessed, she was able to see how these possibilities connected to all the other things that her school was doing. She left the meeting inspired to find a way to raise these issues at her school.

Another director attending an annual network meeting participated in a discussion about the importance of standard setting for the network elementary schools. This discussion, although very contentious, made her realize that the staff of her school could indeed benefit by looking more carefully at its practices and relating them to standards held by the school but not yet formally articulated.

These examples help us to understand the critical role that networks can play in supporting both personal and professional growth. The Center for Collaborative Education network supports directors not only in articulating educational values of learner-centeredness but in developing social values that suggest what democratic schools should be. This helps them make sense of the daily struggles against bureaucratic routine and the human crises that occur so frequently, giving energy and commitment to their work. Seeking help is not seen as a weakness, but rather a part of the personal and organizational expectations of the entire community.

Networking for knowledge building and support is thus a norm of learner-centered communities, one that nurtures and encourages collective discussion and problem solving around tough issues of diversity and curriculum, as well as differing cultural and pedagogical practices (Lieberman and McLaughlin, 1992). Commitment to the hard work of changing schools comes from a will and a motivation that cannot be imposed by policies from above, as it stems from a shared belief in ideals that provide meaning and direction in the face of seemingly intractable problems (McLaughlin, 1987).

Reframing Leadership

In some ways Center for Collaborative Education schools seem like other schools trying to deal with changing student and parent populations, and with the integration of new knowledge and approaches to learning and assessment. What makes these schools different is the ideals they share that find expression in the dailiness of their work and in the way that their leaders lead: providing perspective in the midst of confusion, solving problems and setting problem-solving norms, setting priorities among competing agendas, making conflict productive, gauging the temperature of the community and acting on its needs, being respectful of each other when placing blame is easier, taking care of things backstage while the teachers and students are on stage. Teacher-directors, although their styles and strengths differ, tend to be both passionate in their beliefs and optimistic about what these beliefs will enable them to accomplish. They measure their success by the extent to which they support the collective conscience of their own school communities as well as by the extent to which

their ideas and practices influence and support the work and ideas of others.

In the traditional school, the principal is assumed to be the fount of pedagogical knowledge as well as the repository of power and control over all resources -- both human and material. The principal holds power by virtue of her/his position. Meetings are most often for the principal to present his/her agenda. In fact, the traditional definition of a good school has often been that it is orderly and technically well-run. While no one would dispute the need for an orderly and well-run school, in the Center for Collaborative Education schools, order is important if it is perceived as enabling for teachers and students. These members of the school community are not cut out of the decision-making process. Instead, the directors organize the schools so that all members have input into decisions critical to their lives and their work.

This change redefines the role of leadership and it is perhaps our most significant learning. In learner-centered schools the leaders are not only chosen *by* the community; they are themselves members *of* the community, and are also held directly accountable *to* the community. Leadership is centered around the enactment of the ideals that the community embraces, recognizing that it is an unfinished work, a culture continually in the making.

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